

The Downfall of Sihanouk: Don't Blame It on CIA

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PHNOM PENH, Cambodia —

The American Central Intelligence Agency could not claim the credit for overthrowing Prince Norodom Sihanouk as Cambodian chief of state even if it wanted for some reason to publicize its role here.

All the ingredients exist in this pleasant, intrigue-filled capital, only 50 miles from the South Vietnamese border, for high-level international spy drama, but no one here has found a shred of evidence to indicate the CIA was even remotely involved in Sihanouk's downfall.

The truth of the CIA's non-role in Cambodian politics strains credibility, particularly in view of Sihanouk's hostility to America's role in Vietnam and the desire of American military leaders and diplomats for Cambodian cooperation in fighting the Vietnamese Communists based in "sanctuaries" along the frontier.

Yet the American presence in Cambodia, when Sihanouk was overthrown on March 18, was limited officially to only two diplomats and a small embassy staff. No American businessmen lived here.

American newsmen visited the country only rarely, and then usually on tourist visas, and no American military advisers, AID officials or information officers had been here since Sihanouk expelled them all in 1963 and 1964.

The CIA may well hire operatives from among the sizable French community or among Cambodians, but the agency's activities in all other countries in Southeast Asia seem to depend basically on the existence of large American embassies and aid missions.

The CIA "station chief" in most countries holds the title of "special assistant to the ambassador," and members of his staff serve as embassy "political officers," American AID officials and the like.

In neighboring Thailand, for instance, the CIA assigns agents under the auspices of the AID mission's public safety program, ostensibly an effort aimed solely at building up the Thai national police force. In South Vietnam, CIA agents in the field often advise the Phoenix program, the South Vietnamese government's American-inspired intelligence gathering operation.

The almost complete lack of an

American presence here before Sihanouk's downfall does not of course exclude the possibility that CIA-hired operatives could somehow have engineered the movement against him.

The anti-Sihanouk drive among intellectuals politicians and cabinet ministers was so overwhelming, however, as to contradict any impression it might have been the result of a plot among a limited circle of American-paid operatives.

The pressure against Sihanouk, mounting almost unnoticed for the past two or three years, already had become apparent to analysts here when the prince appointed his conservative military commander, Gen. Lon Nol, as prime minister in August.

The reason for discontent, besides Sihanouk's reluctance to attempt to drive the Vietnamese Communists from frontier base areas, was his failure to cope with mounting economic problems.

The national assembly in December approved a bill undoing his Socialist economic policies.

Sihanouk clashed openly with Prince Sisowath Sirik Matak, the first deputy prime minister, whom

he accused of attempting to "undermine" Lon Nol.

Sihanouk's accusation against Sirik Matak, a member of a rival branch of the royal family, epitomized the manner in which he was accustomed to playing his ministers against each other in order to maintain his own position.

And yet Lon Nol, although he did not directly oppose the prince, was already known to have allied with Sirik Matak, the prime mover behind the opposition to Sihanouk's economic outlook.

Sihanouk was also confronted by increasingly vocal, though subtle, hostility among a handful of deputies who persisted in posing embarrassing questions about the influence of his wife, Princess Monique, and his in-laws and personal friends.

He attempted to cut down the influence of some of these deputies by police investigations of their activities, but he was always afraid of the reaction he might provoke by arresting them or attempting to expel them from the assembly.

"He did not mind jailing little people," said Douk Rasy, one of the rebellious deputies, "but with ministers and assemblymen he used

threats and intimidation. He was strong enough to keep anyone from urging him to resign."

One of the strangest ironies of the drama of Sihanouk's decline and fall was that his opponents in the assembly criticized him for his militant campaign against indigenous Cambodian Communists, who were supported by the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops.

"I said he must have the proof," said Rasy, "but he said he had the right to suspend the constitution if he wished and jail these people without trial."

The reason Sihanouk's anti-communist critics objected to the manner in which he fought the Cambodian Communists was their fear he might employ the same tactics against them.

Sihanouk's opponents were afraid he might finally suspend the constitution entirely and turn the country into a complete dictatorship.

In their campaign against the prince, however, none of Sihanouk's opponents seemed particularly aware of the consequences in terms of the United States, much less the Central Intelligence Agency. Most of them, including Lon Nol, do not

... speak English, do not seek out the company of Americans and do not seem attuned to "American influence" in general.

The main Western influence on Cambodia is France, which ruled the country until Sihanouk himself led a bloodless campaign for independence after World War II. Sihanouk, after obtaining complete independence in 1953, developed close ties with France and permitted French business interests to remain here.

The French also maintain a military advisory mission as well as advisers in all the ministries. Frenchmen helped Sihanouk write his speeches and edited some of his magazines.

One difference between Sihanouk and his opponents was that most of them did not share his antipathy to the U. S. Military officers, although they gladly accepted Chinese and Russian arms and equipment, did not think he should have expelled the American Military Assistance and Advisory Group in 1963.

Cambodian officers in particular like to recall the training they received in the U.S. This phase of the American effort, in the opinion of

knowledgeable observers here, was probably more influential than any other American program here.

Although there is no evidence to support it, it might be logical to assume that some of Cambodia's American-trained officers had fallen so much under American influence as to serve the CIA.

Even if this assumption were correct, analysts here point out, it could hardly explain the overthrow of Sihanouk. It was not a clique of military officers but the non-military national assembly and royal council which voted unanimously to expel him while he was in Moscow returning home from three months of vacation and medical treatment in France.

To some experienced observers of war and revolution in Southeast Asia, however, the most convincing evidence of the CIA's lack of influence on Sihanouk's downfall was that it went so smoothly.

"The CIA would have sponsored a whole army here and Sihanouk would still be in power," said one analyst. "The smartest thing the agency ever did was to keep out and stay out."